Terminal Heat: A Dialogue of Exile

by Jonathan Olvera

Jonathan sat with his grandfather in the stillness of the desert evening, the air thick with what he called *terminal heat*. The old man's hands moved over a box of seeds, counting, taking inventory, preparing for the planting season. Jonathan watched him closely, listening as he spoke with the gravity of years.

"It was long ago," his grandfather began, "when I had the job to count every small square of the temple. Back then, I had an idea—for the public benefit, to improve the work of our father and expand this empire. I thought it might spare my scouts from seeing the haunting face of failure."

Jonathan's eyes burned with conviction. "I put all my trust in him. I am like him."

His grandfather studied him. "And what else is going to happen? Do you feel challenged? You should think more about going to school."

"I like that as an obstacle," Jonathan replied. "I am a polite young man. I am not a criminal."

"That is good," the old man said firmly. "There is nothing worse than liars and criminals."

Jonathan's voice grew sharp. "I know what is worse than a liar and a criminal. An intruder. Fat, ugly intruders."

The old man frowned. "Watch your tongue. Behave more. Praise God. If someone told me today to put my boots on and take one step forward in faith, I would do it."

Jonathan shook his head. "The aquarium isn't everything, Grandpa. There is more to life than mining. It doesn't bother me that you talk about it, but it bothers some people."

His grandfather's eyes narrowed. "Would it bother you if someone came here looking for you? Because that is what happened."

Jonathan smiled faintly, answering with defiance. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The old man leaned forward. "You must pay attention. I will tell you how things are done. The danger is real. People come from many places and they ask terrible questions."

"I do not fear this," Jonathan answered. "I only ponder what young people should think about. Meanwhile, we make merry. Have plenty—or at least have some."

“There is no other way,” his grandfather muttered.

“I am here,” Jonathan said. “And this is terminal heat. Terminal heat.”

The old man seemed lost in thought, slipping into one of his episodes. He spoke of intruders, of conflicts with foreign men, his voice wavering between reason and memory. Jonathan steadied him: “Why don’t you go to church, Grandpa? Read the scriptures. I believe in it. There is a promise.”

“It doesn’t exist!” the old man shouted.

“Father,” Jonathan said gently, “do not use your family. There could be benefits in going to church.”

The old man sighed, his voice softer now. “Sometimes I worry. Not too much. Do you know anything about it?”

“No,” Jonathan admitted.

“Then come with me,” his grandfather said. And they prayed together, their voices mingling in praise: *Amen. Hallelujah.*

Jonathan echoed, “Praise Him. It is all good work.”

The conversation shifted as the old man bent back over his seed collection. “I’ve been keeping lists. Food must be planted, and planted well.”

Jonathan watched him scribble in his notebook. “The sun seems to speak,” he said. “Is it hypnotism?”

“Sometimes I don’t have the answer,” his grandfather admitted.

Jonathan thought of the church, the temple, the leaders he had seen. “There is a man there I trust. Determined, steady. When he asks, I answer: yes, sir.”

“That’s fine,” the old man replied. “I’ve had my fair share of battles.”

“But you’ve been through it, Grandpa,” Jonathan pressed. “I hope everyone will be.”

The old man smiled slyly. “Then let us look for a natural remedy.”

Jonathan laughed. “I hate to admit it, but I do that too. It’s called hot chocolate.”

“Drink hot chocolate, then,” his grandfather said, amused.

“I’m glad you do,” Jonathan teased. “We could be here a very long time.”

They shared a quiet *praise* and *amen*.

The old man turned back to his work. “I know the men to ask. Their produce is always good—even if it’s a death sentence.”

Jonathan lowered his head. “I have many foolish ideas. Time enough to listen.”

“Would you like to hear of men condemned?” his grandfather asked.

“Everything is measured,” Jonathan replied carefully.

The old man’s voice darkened again, sliding into another episode. “The man who sends you to say these things—does he oppose us? What would he think of your place here? You think it unimportant, but it is.”

Jonathan stood tall. “This is nothing less than the word incarnate of our leader. Things that have come to pass.”

“It has been accepted,” his grandfather admitted.

Jonathan whispered, “Sometimes we should all be considered machines.”

“That will do,” the old man said. “Jonathan, you are gifted and talented.”

“Oh, spare me,” Jonathan muttered, before lifting his gaze. “The word has come to me. A joyous proclamation.”

His grandfather asked, “The new word?”

Jonathan answered only with a question: “Are you aware of the news?”

The old man shook his head. “To touch things unspoken, to explore the wild, to pick up what is forbidden—that is irresponsible.”

Jonathan interrupted: “I give thanks for the hands at work, for those who feed on stones. It is just as important as remembering the people who were here before us—our ancestors, our parish folk.”

“You could, and I would hold you accountable,” the old man warned.

At that moment, they were interrupted by a child no older than nine. The boy’s clothes were dirty, his eyes wide with exhaustion.

“Hi,” he said softly. “How are you? I’m new here. I’m looking for work. Mother and I had to leave our home. It was always wet, and she didn’t want us to get sick. I eat almost everything. I like to paint. I try to make myself useful. Do you think I’ll fit in?”

Jonathan and his grandfather exchanged glances, then both answered: “Yes.”

The boy smiled faintly. “I have to wash my clothes. We traveled so far, and all I have is dirty now. But I’m honest. I can look good if you need me to. Do you know anywhere I could help?”

The silence stretched. The desert wind moved through the seeds, through the stones, through their weary lives. Jonathan looked at his grandfather, then at the boy, and thought: *This, too, is how nations are built.*